

BUTOH

AND THE SEARCH FOR A RESONANT PERFORMANCE LANGUAGE

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BY Coralie Vernon

Mention 'butoh influence' in the work of performance artists Tess De Quincey and Stuart Lynch and watch the sparks fly! De Quincey's reply is passionate, 'I performed for six years with a butoh company in Japan, after studying for two years with Kazuo Ono, as well as performing in Hijikata's clubs! I am butoh!'

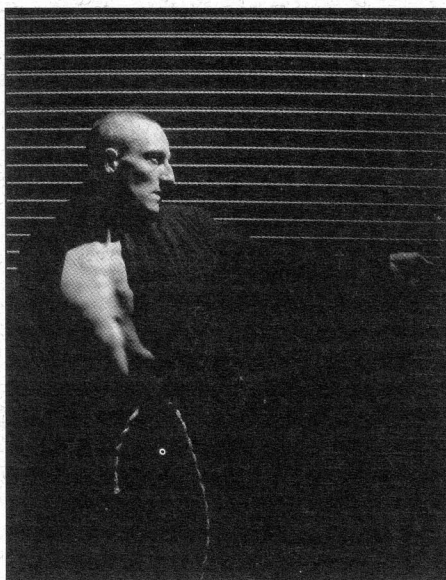
'Butoh-inspired' equally galls, as De Quincey explains, 'It implies you are coming from another place, something is skating across you and you are grabbing it. This is not the case in the work that we have done and were part of.' The reason why people never say they are butoh performers, but instead they are butoh-inspired may be, as Lynch suggests, that as butoh is Japanese and you are a foreigner, you can therefore only study it. On the eve of 1997 Australian Dance Week Lynch and De Quincey, whose major experimental work *Compression 100* formed a highlight of 1996 Australian Dance Week, reflect on their work as Europeans in a performance form that originated in Japan.

Butoh is often misunderstood, says De Quincey, who stresses the form does not deal with expression but existence. Some, says Lynch, are drawn by its aesthetic of ugliness (*ankoku* butoh, is often translated as dance of darkness) and mistakenly view butoh as performance-as-catharsis.

The butoh movement was founded by Tatsumi Hijikata after World War II as a revolt against American aesthetics and the idealised American body. Hijikata's concerns were very much about re-finding Japaneseness, explains De Quincey.

'What he was expressing had very much to do with the land, the relation to the earth, notions that can be traced back into the Noh theatre, early Shinto belief and Buddhist belief. Within his whole harnessing was some very ancient traditional concepts. At the same time, he wanted to come to terms with modernity. He was extremely influenced by Mary Wigman, Harald Kreutzberg and a lot of the European avant-garde, so from the very beginning, even though he was concerned with the Japanese body he did have horizons and visions which were very strongly affected by modernity.

'He set into action a whole revolt of aesthetic ideal and thought. As opposed to the striving for the sky, butoh is more about darkness, about shadows, it's about what you don't see initially, and also a question of a non-idealised body, a body that bears the trauma of life and that there is beauty in this. A tree is warped by its surroundings and by the nature of its environment, and the concern is then to let that be, that this has value in itself.'



STUART LYNCH, SOLO, PARADANCE 17 FUCK ME



TESS DE QUINCEY, IS, THE PERFORMANCE SPACE, APRIL 1994

Various exponents have since taken the form in different directions. Min Tanaka, director of the Mai-Juku Performance Group has an international focus. Both Lynch and De Quincey performed for the Performance Company the former for 2 years from 1991 to 1993 and the latter for six years from 1985 to 1991. Tess De Quincey explains, 'I went to work with Min because he was very clearly something different to the main run of the butoh movement and that's partly because he was one of the first to really work internationally. His own vision and perspective was towards an international dialogue and a language which accepted a universality.

'The company was half Japanese and half foreign. One of the earmarks of Mai-Juku was Min's persistent working as a solo dancer with musicians and visual artists. He had a very strongly improvised tradition, so his meeting was basically into the American avant-garde and the European avant-garde. A lot of work was done with musicians like Cecil Taylor, Derek Milford Graces Bailey, recently with Jesse Norman, and within the visual arts field we did productions with artists such as Richard Serra and Karel Appel. There was a meeting around concepts of improvisation which simply didn't exist in the same way within the butoh movement. Min moved butoh into that field.'

Since 1992 Tess De Quincey and Stuart Lynch worked collaboratively as directors of the De Quincey-Lynch Performance Union, based in Australia and Denmark. Their work includes performance, as well as the teaching of *Body Weather*, a strategy for performers and non-performers for aligning the body and mind, developed by Min Tanaka and his Mai-Juku Performance Company. De Quincey and Lynch are currently developing a theatre work, using their performance language, based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Lynch says his search with De Quincey has been 'to develop a collaborative language unique to us working together as well as putting clearly the butoh language into the perspective of a European base and an Australian base, to avoid becoming what I would call 'butoid' - where you are, if you like, imitating the form of open mouthed emptiness.'

For De Quincey, the question of whether her work is butoh, or butoh based, has become irrelevant: 'I'm not even thinking about butoh on one level. The base of the butoh as I experience it, is for me very strongly present. There is a sense of the weight of the body, the obscurity of the body, and of being affected by the space. Also, of the relation of the body and the space being integral. To 'dance the space' if you like, this is a central concern and I see that's absolutely fundamental to the butoh principle. The sense of weight and obscurity again is a totally butoh concern, but at the same time, I'm not actually thinking in my work as to whether it's butoh or not. It's a very integral part of my language now.'

Coralie Vernon is New South Wales Coordinator for 1997 Australian Dance Week (26 April - 4 May). During Australian Dance Week, an initiative of Ausdance, the national dance network, the diversity of Australian dance will be celebrated in the theme of Your Culture Your Dance. For information contact Ausdance on (02) 9241 4022.

